

Jeremiah 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 16. The word of the Lord came to me, You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them, and the fathers who fathered them in this land.

They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine.

And their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth. For thus says the Lord, Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or grieve for them, for I have taken away my peace from this people. My steadfast love and mercy declares the Lord.

Both great and small shall die in this land. They shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them, or cut himself, or make himself bald for them. No one shall break bread for the mourner, to comfort him for the dead.

Nor shall anyone give him the cup of consolation to drink for his father or his mother. You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride.

[1 : 26] And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?

Then you shall say to them, Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord, and have gone after other gods, and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me, and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me.

Therefore I will hurl you out of this land, into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.

Therefore behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but as the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them.

For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them, and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks, for my eyes are on all their ways.

[2 : 48] They are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes. But first I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.

O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come, from the ends of the earth, and say, Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit.

Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods. Therefore, behold, I will make them know, this once I will make them know my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the Lord. Jeremiah chapter 16 begins with a devastating word to the prophet. Jeremiah is instructed not to take a wife. He must not make attachments or have dependents.

The people of the place of Jerusalem are doomed to gruesome and dishonoring deaths. This isn't just a short-term instruction, but a permanent one. He's going to be assigned to the people.

[3 : 55] He's not going to put down roots. He's not going to have social attachments. And he's not going to seek to leave a family legacy. The instruction is particularly related to In this place.

It is in Jerusalem and Judah in particular that taking a wife and bearing children would doom the prophet to such misery that it would be best for him not to attempt to do so at all. Jeremiah is already alone.

He's cut off from the people of his town. He faces opposition on all sides. Now he won't even have a wife and a family to surround him. He is utterly alone. Not taking a wife was very rare for a Jewish man of Jeremiah's day.

Intentional celibacy was even more so. To the modern mind, foregoing sexual relations and the relational intimacy with a partner might seem to be the biggest sacrifices. But to someone of Jeremiah's day, not taking a wife and having children would have entailed a far more complete social alienation and isolation.

It would also have been devastating in not having anyone to continue your name and legacy. It was a closing off of the future and its hope. This instruction was presumably given earlier in Jeremiah's ministry, even if this prophecy comes from some time later on.

[5 : 05] Difficult though the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah might have been, it preserved him from the full force of the judgment that was about to come upon the land. Those who had children would lose them to the most gruesome and ignominious of deaths.

They would experience the cruelest sorrow and be utterly bereft. The bodies of the people of the place would be like dung on the surface of the ground. They would suffer untimely deaths and they would not be buried.

In addition to preserving Jeremiah from the full force of such a judgment, the Lord is also using Jeremiah to symbolize the aloneness and the bereftness of Judah following its judgment.

The prophet must experience the place in the light of its coming destruction. He must sever emotional and relational ties in anticipation of their hastening fate. He is living, surrounded by doomed people and he must not get too attached.

He is instructed against going to the house of mourning. He must not lament or grieve with those who have been bereaved. Not only must he not mourn for or with these doomed people, he must not celebrate with them either.

[6 : 10] He is instructed against participating in the festivities of weddings and other such events. The time will soon come when the silence of the grave will descend upon Jerusalem. The voices of feasting and gladness, the voices of weddings, will all be silenced in an instant.

And a city full of the hubbub of voices will become a desolate tomb. In all of this, along with his message, Jeremiah serves as a sign for the people. Seeing the prophet without hope of a family for the future, seeing the prophet not participating in the basic cycles of life, the weddings and the funerals of the city, should be a sign to them that all of that is about to be cut off for them.

Jeremiah is, as it were, a man from a future time, a time of desolation, who has been sent back to live in this city in which the regular patterns of life continue as they have ever done.

His presence in the city, along with his message, is a constant, irritating, incessant reminder of what is about to befall. However, when Jeremiah brings his message to the people, their response will be to question what their iniquity is.

They can't acknowledge that they have done anything wrong. Self-righteous, they will question why judgment will come upon them. They still can't understand. The Lord gives Jeremiah the indictment upon them.

[7 : 27] The people's fathers forsook him to serve other gods, and they did not just continue in the ways of their fathers. They have acted in a manner that is worse than that of their fathers. They have forsaken the Lord for idols, and in their own stubborn will, they have refused to listen to the Lord or to obey him.

As a result, he is going to give them over to their will. As they have turned aside after other gods that they have not known, so they will go to a land that neither they nor their fathers have known, and there they will experience cruel bondage to the gods that they once went after, serving them day and night.

The Lord has cut off his favour from them. Life in the land, as we see in verse 3, depends upon the peace of the Lord, his steadfast love and his mercy, and those things have been cut off.

They have been left to their own devices, they have been given up, and as a result, they are doomed to the most bitter of fates. Verses 14-15 inject a note of hope into this declaration of judgment.

The prophet declares that days are coming in which the Lord's deliverance of them from exile will be seen as an action that exceeds the action of his deliverance of them from Egypt. A similar formula is also seen in Jeremiah 7-32.

[8 : 38] Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere.

There is hope in the Lord's statement here, but the hope is that of the light at the end of a very deep and dark tunnel. Before the hope of that light will really begin to be felt by them, they must first enter into the darkness.

The prophecy of restoration is delivered in the form of a statement concerning vows that people will take in the name of the Lord, in which the name of the Lord is attached to actions by which his character and his might have been displayed.

In chapter 4, verses 1-2 we read, If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence and do not waver, and if you swear, as the Lord lives in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.

The vow form here might imply the blessings that the nations will declare in the name of the Lord when they see his deliverance of his people. However, before deliverance can be known, the judgment must first fall.

[9 : 49] The Lord is sending fishers and hunters to catch them. No mountain, no crevice, will be sufficient to hide them from being trapped by these skilled men. The Lord has seen everything that they have done.

Their iniquity is known to him, so he has appointed people to track them down, to pursue them, to catch them, and to bring them to judgment. On account of their idolatries, their iniquity will be paid back double.

Once again, in verses 19-20, a note of hope enters in. Like the psalmist often does, Jeremiah speaks of the Lord as his strength and stronghold, his refuge in the day of trouble.

Back in chapter 3, verse 17, we read, At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.

Similar descriptions of the conversion and repentance of the nations can be seen in places like Isaiah chapter 2. Here, the nations are going to realize the futility of their idolatry.

[10 : 49] The Lord has delivered his people. In the Exodus, he proved his might over the gods of the Egyptians, and now once again in Israel's history, he has proved his power. The nations will see it, they will repent their idolatries, and they will turn to the Lord.

They turn away from the worthless things that they have inherited from their fathers, literally the vapor that they once depended upon. The idols are emptiness, they're not able to save, they are not gods.

This is a common theme in the prophets. The incomparability and the uniqueness of God is demonstrated in his future salvation of his people. God is unique as creator, God is unique as the one who governs history, and God will demonstrate his uniqueness in the fulfillment of his promises, the judgment of the wicked, and the deliverance of his people.

A question to consider. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7, the apostle Paul, who also did not take a wife, teaches the Corinthians that there are some situations where it is better not to marry, most particularly in the present distress of those days.

In what ways is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, similar in its reasoning to the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah here, in what significant ways is it different? In 2 Corinthians chapter 8, in what significant ways is it different?